

The Manitoba School Case.

An Independent Opinion on this Important Question.

So far as this question has been dragged into the politics of our country, it is not the province of the writer to follow it. So far as it stands related to our national life, and civil and religious liberty, it demands the careful consideration of all.

In this connection attention may be called to two points, may we not say TWO ERRORS.

It is widely claimed that the Roman Catholic minority in Manitoba asking for the restoration of separate schools, is only asking for the privilege accorded to the Protestant minority in Quebec.

The cases of Manitoba and Quebec are in no way parallel.

In Quebec, the majority, or rather the Church which controls the schools of the majority, uses its schools for teaching the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. The R. C. catechism is a chief text book. The first and main thing sought in these schools is to make good Catholics. All other education is secondary. Moreover, a part of the instruction in the tenets of the R. C. Church is that the doctrines of all other Churches are dangerous, false, blasphemous.

To compel Protestants to support such schools, established for the purpose of opposing and destroying their most cherished beliefs, would be bringing into Canada something of the Middle Ages, when men had to worship with Rome or die.

The very fact that a majority in a free country is determined to use the schools of the country for teaching the catechism and creed of any particular church, makes it absolutely necessary that other churches should not be compelled to support them. This freedom is granted in Quebec, to

M. D. A. P.

1895

the extent, that where there is a sufficient number of Protestants to form a dissentient school, and they make application to Government for that purpose, they are allowed the privilege, otherwise they must support the R. C. schools.

In Manitoba the case is entirely different. The majority does not wish to teach the special doctrine of any church. The object for which its schools are established is to train the young in knowledge that will fit them for being good citizens, and it leaves to parents and churches the work of training them for church membership. There is no hardship or unfairness in asking the Roman Catholic citizens to support the public school system, any more than in asking them as citizens to do their share of any public work that is for the equal benefit of all.

The position of parties in the two provinces is thus very different. In Quebec the majority demand that their schools shall teach Romanism, and they allow the minority, under certain conditions, to have separate schools. In Manitoba, the majority provide schools that will fit all the young people for being good citizens, but demand that these schools shall not be used for advancing the special interests of Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, or any other denomination. They claim that churches should do their own special work, which the Roman Catholics are as free to do as any other.

If there were no separate schools in Quebec the minority would have to support schools which exist for the express purpose of opposing and overthrowing all other denominations. In Manitoba the minority is not asked to support schools which exist for the purpose of opposing Rome, or for upholding any other denomination, but national schools, which teach no catechism, and discredit the religious beliefs of no denomination.

The Roman Catholics of Manitoba have the same privileges that the Presbyterians or Episcopalians, or Methodists, or Baptists, of Manitoba, have; the privilege of getting a good education for their children in the public schools, without having their religious beliefs interfered with, and the privilege of giving their children instruction in their own catechisms in whatever way they may think best, outside the public schools.

The cry for fair play is widely echoed. Fair play demands that the Roman Catholics get the same privileges that other denominations do, no less, no more. At present they have that fair play in Manitoba, instruction on equal terms in all other matters, and equal liberty to instruct their children in their own catechism.

If the present order of things is reversed, and separate schools are re-established there will not be fair play. The Roman Catholics will then have Government-aided schools with their own catechism as a text book, while the Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians or Baptists, will have no such liberty.

In Quebec, other denominations have not the same privileges that the Roman Catholics have. Presbyterians cannot use their catechism in the separate schools, nor can Episcopalians or others use theirs. These other denominations have to make some sacrifice, to unite on some common ground, in order to get the benefits of an education, and under such a separate school system there is not fair play.

Fair play demands that the present order of things in Manitoba be maintained. To go back to the former position is to give to the Romanists an advantage that others are not allowed, and every lover of freedom and of his country should stand for fair play to all and favors to none.

2. A second error in many minds is that the Roman Catholic people feel it to be a great grievance not to have the separate schools with their catechism as a text-book.

If this were the case there would be more sympathy for the old schools even though the claim be unjust. But such is not the fact.

The R. C. people are realizing that the schools, as controlled by the Church, are utterly inefficient; that the children coming out of such schools from the average country district, with little education beyond their knowledge of the catechism and church observances are sadly wanting in equipment for the work of life.

It is an open secret that a great body of the Roman Catholic people, both in Manitoba and Quebec, would prefer public national schools, and if there were a free expression of the opinion of the intelligent Roman Catholics of Canada, there is little doubt that it would be largely in favor of public national schools, apart from the control of the clergy.

This is seen in the number who take advantage of other and better schools when they have the opportunity. It is seen in the demands that the more independent of their newspapers sometimes make, that the people, and not the clergy, shall control the schools. It is seen in the complaints often made in private by intelligent Roman Catholics, to Protestants whom they meet in business relations, that the clergy control the schools and use them for their own special ends.

The agitation to restore separate schools in Manitoba is not kept up by the Roman Catholic people in Manitoba or of those of Quebec. The "grievance" is the "grievance" of the R. C. clergy. The agitation is the work of the clergy, who seek to keep control of the education of the young, and who are exerting their utmost efforts to that end.

The question that has faced a free people, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, of Manitoba, is whether they will have for their children the best education they can get, and have the churches teach their own catechism, or whether they will yield to the claims of the Roman Catholic clergy and allow some of the schools to be made what they may choose to make them.

The question that faces the people of the Dominion is not whether they will show sympathy for their Roman Catholic fellow-countrymen, but whether they will join with the clergy of the Church of Rome in their effort to wrest and keep from the people the control of their common schools, and force upon a young and growing country the fetters of mediæval ecclesiasticism.